

## **It's Not (Just) About You: Invest in Others**

Acts 26:12-20

If you've ever bought a house, you know the routine of house-hunting. Or maybe I should say, you know at least *one* of the routines. Because people obviously go at it in different ways, and you'll have done what was comfortable to you.

Some people obviously love the *looking*. In fact, it doesn't really matter whether they intend to buy a house or not: they just like to ride around and *see* houses. Tell them a holiday tour of homes is going on, and they'll even *pay* to parade with the crowd and see places decorated as no human could possibly keep them. And their idea of a fun Sunday afternoon (and maybe Sunday morning, too) is to comb the Real Estate section of the newspaper, search out all the open houses in the area, and wander through them. Well, a few of you are realtors, and I'm told that one of the profession's attractions is the pure fun of going and seeing as much as you do. I think that's great, because when I buy or sell a house I depend on you and your experience. And of course it isn't just houses; some people are *store* browsers: they like to walk and look, whether or not they buy anything. I used to work with a computer-catalogue browser, and it was great, because whenever I needed a solution at the office, he knew just the hardware or software that would do the job and the best place to buy it.

As for me, I get tired of looking pretty quickly. About a day or two of serious house-hunting, and I've had my fill. And that's if I'm in the market to buy! I need realtors and browsers around me to give me solid, objective information. In other words, I want someone who INVESTS their knowledge and ability in me.

If I don't want to buy, forget it: I have no use for merely touring other people's living spaces. Why? Because I don't have the artistic or business capacity to do anything with what I've seen. I don't have any reasonable way to put it to use. If somebody wants me to go with them to the mall, that's fine: just make sure I have a chair to sit in and a book to read! *That*, I know how to share with someone else!

Some people treat churches the same way (and *a lot* of church members assume that that's the how it ought to be): if people are "the religious type," they'll go to the sort of church that suits their tastes, or they'll visit around until they find a place they're comfortable. And some people just like to move from church to church, never settling anywhere. All the churches have to do is *be there* and open the doors; the "church-hoppers" and "church-shoppers" will take care of the rest. And the ones who are inclined to do so will join when they're ready (and stay 'till a more interesting opportunity comes along). On the other hand, if people aren't the "religious" type (or, as I've been told, mostly by members of dead and dying churches, if people aren't the "Methodist" type), they aren't going to come where we are anyway, and there isn't much we can do about it.

As with house-hunting, I can tell you my experience. When we lived in Georgia and my UM Conference appointment involved doing things other than

pastoring, our family had the chance to visit in a number of churches. Most of the time, I disliked it about as much as I dislike prolonged house-hunting.

It wasn't that I didn't have reason for visiting. But I was ready to "buy." I was bored with the idea of continual, casual looking. There's probably a place and time for observing and gathering ideas about what goes on in other houses of worship; I've done a little of that at various points in my life, and it can be informative and useful for some purposes. But I had a family, and like every family everywhere, they needed a church home. So did I: I wanted to become part of a congregation where something significant was happening—and where I could offer something useful.

When Christianity began, it wasn't with a mere browser's mentality. God made sure of that. When it spread from the little community of Jewish disciples to the wider Mediterranean world, when it expanded at any time or place in church history that I know about, and where it is growing in the world today, Christianity relied and still relies instead on people reaching out to other people.

The Book of Acts is the story of how the Holy Spirit directed *mission*. The passage we'll be looking at this morning tells us that the risen Lord signaled that approach to Paul in the very moments of Paul's initial encounter with Him. And Paul never forgot it.

More than that: the Book of Acts was included in the New Testament because the church saw the book's message as more than *descriptive*. The story was in some sense *prescriptive* for them. Christians found something here that reveals not just the way things *were*, but the way things *ought to be*. And there's something here that reflects the way we want things to be here at A&M UMC, too.

Over the next five weeks, the sermons will be focusing on a reorganized strategy for ministry at A&M UMC. If you've been watching and listening in recent months, and if you know about the offices that'll be voted on at this afternoon's Church Conference, you'll have noticed five work areas bear Kip's characteristic alliterative stamp. The "5 I's of Ministry," as he's calling them: INVEST, INVITE, INCLUDE, INVOLVE, IMPLEMENT.

Today, we'll be looking at Acts 26 and our call as Christians to INVEST our lives in others. Acts 26; if you'd like to turn there, we'll read from it in a minute.

How about a little historical context first? The place is Caesarea, on the Mediterranean coast of Samaria, NW of Jerusalem. It's the year 59, and a new procurator (Roman governor), Porcius Festus, has come to town (succeeding Felix, who had been recalled to Rome, under indictment for brutally intervening in a minor riot between Jews and Greeks, for massacring Jews, and for allowing his soldiers to plunder their homes). So Festus arrives, understandably eager to get in the good graces of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, and to please them suggests that Paul be taken to Jerusalem to answer the charges against him from the Jews.

Instead, Paul (who has already been in custody in Caesarea for 2 years, and who knows that in Jerusalem he's sure to face both an unfair trial and plots on his life) exercises his right as a Roman citizen and appeals his case to the emperor (Nero).

Fine and dandy; the only problem is that Festus doesn't have a chargeable offense against Paul to write to the emperor when he sends Paul to Rome. Problem solved: the 32-year old king Agrippa II (great-grandson of Herod) shows up along with his wife Bernice who, incidentally, is also his sister (yes, the incestuous relationship was well known). Well, they probably have a little wine, and Festus tells Agrippa about this strange legal case he's inherited. And Agrippa is naturally eager to hear this fellow named Paul who, as best Festus has been able to figure out, is in prison for no other reason than that he had, in Festus's words, "some disagreements" with his accusers "about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, but whom Paul asserted to be alive."

So Paul gets to present his case in front of Agrippa, and here he is, defending himself, describing his experience as a former opponent of the fledgling church, but ultimately trying to INVEST something of himself as a witness to Agrippa:

Acts 26:12-20 "... I was traveling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, <sup>13</sup>when at midday along the road, your Excellency, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. <sup>14</sup>When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.' <sup>15</sup>I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The Lord answered, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. <sup>16</sup>But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. <sup>17</sup>I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you <sup>18</sup>to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

<sup>19</sup>"After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, <sup>20</sup>but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance.

Three times in Acts, we're told the story of Paul's Damascus-road experience. Lots of people call it Paul's "conversion," but Paul himself never does. Instead, he writes about it as the time when the risen Christ *appeared* to him and *called him*. And that's actually precisely what Acts describes: a blinding light appears to Paul (who was still known by his Hebrew name, Saul), and the voice of Jesus sets him straight about what is going on (he is opposing and persecuting, not just the church, but Jesus himself), and then **the Lord summons him to a purpose.**

**And that purpose is what I want us to pay special attention to this morning.** What I want us to see can be stated in a couple of negatives and a positive.

### **It Wasn't About Paul, and It's Not About Us**

The first thing is that **Paul's vision wasn't primarily about Paul, and what God calls you and me to isn't mainly about us.**

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Two churches our family visited in the Atlanta area offered an interesting contrast. At the first, Martha and I walked into a Sunday School class that was arranged in a circle. When I'm visiting churches, I almost always go early enough to attend Sunday school if the church has adult classes. Why? I've discovered that you can learn more about what a church is really like from the way Sunday schools behave than by attending a worship service. (If you want an explanation, I'll give it to you another time.)

So anyway, we were early enough to get information about classes and to make our way to a room where a couple of little groups of friends had already formed. Each was engaged in a lively discussion, so Martha and I sat down in the big circle of chairs. After a few minutes, I began to wonder if we were invisible. The women across the room glanced our direction and returned to their chatter, the men standing around the coffee pot continued recapping the latest bunch of ball games, and no one said a word to us. As more people came in, they either joined their friends or sat down in other chairs.

You begin to get the picture, right? From the time we sat down until the lesson was over and everyone walked out of the room, not a single person so much as acknowledged our presence. (But neither did anyone try to sit in our chairs, so I concluded that we *were*, in fact, visible.) You probably won't be surprised that we didn't continue attending that church. But you *might* be surprised that almost the exact thing has happened to us on at least three occasions: people so caught up in themselves and their own church group that they don't have time or inclination or ability to INVEST even the smallest aspect of themselves in the life of someone from outside their circle. They may say "hello," but too often that's all.

Second example. When we first visited it, the church had grown from 8 people worshipping in a Montessori school to a membership of about 300 meeting in a couple of store-front units of a strip-shopping center while they built a sanctuary a few miles away. There was no Sunday school; instead, the church had several home groups that met during the week to study, pray, and support one another. The greeter who welcomed us warmly at the door spent time finding out something about us, gave us some of the church's literature, and remembered us each time we returned—even though we didn't join the church, and even after the church had moved to its new worship center and there had been many months between our visits. At some point in their growth, the church developed a nice group of handouts that they gave to visitors. On the front of the folder was emblazoned the message "It's About You."

The "you" in their slogan meant visitors, not the members of the church. The pastor and, as a result, the congregation saw themselves as existing not just to have a good time with one another but to bring others to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and to an experience of victorious living. They said it in their literature, and they showed it in the way they reached out and INVESTED in other people's lives. From a beginning 9 years and three meeting sites earlier, they had bought vehicles, had painted them for what they called a "StreetReach" ministry, and had been

taking them into apartment communities near the church to INVEST in the lives of children who wouldn't otherwise have come to a church. They also began "Angel Food," a church and community food co-op; SafeHouse, an Outreach to the homeless in downtown Atlanta; plus a ministry to guide people in breaking the cycles of poverty and addiction, a prison ministry, elderly & disabled outreaches, a home and hospital visitation program, and sponsorship of full-time missionaries in a half-dozen countries around the world, with lay mission teams going there and elsewhere.

I'm not talking about a megachurch; I'm talking about a church with a megaheart for people outside of its walls.

There were several reasons we never joined that church—not least of which was that it wasn't United Methodist, and I felt responsible to try to contribute to the church in which I was and am ordained. But I retained a friendly relationship with the pastor, and I admire what he's doing. We may have some small doctrinal and stylistic differences, but I'll tell you, if all churches did what that church is doing, this world would be much closer to resembling the kingdom of God than it'll ever be around most churches I've visited.

What the out-reaching church knew is what God said to Paul. Look at it again; it's in verse 16.

**"I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you."**

I don't know about you, but if God were to shine a blazing light around me—a light so bright that it blinded me and knocked everyone around me to the ground—and then were to heal my blindness (you can read more about the incident in Acts 9 and 22), *I'd probably be inclined to think God had taken a rather special interest in me.* And God would probably have to help me understand too that this wasn't about me.

But Paul learned the lesson well. Paul knew that his experience wasn't about him. He had been told so in the beginning, and he had lived it. So, when Festus charged him with being out of his mind (you'll find that a few verses later in Acts 26:24), Paul had a calm and ready answer that turned the focus away from him and onto the possibility of faith in Agrippa.

For us, as for Paul or Jesus' disciples or anyone else we read about in Scripture, the life of followers of Jesus Christ is *not* meant to be about the followers themselves. ***Paul was called, and we are called, with a purpose: to INVEST our lives in others. It isn't about us.***

### **It's Not Even About Jesus (Because It Was Jesus' Purpose First)**

There's a second thing we can say by way of a negative statement. This one may be something of a shock to you, but listen carefully.

When Paul was on his way to Damascus, his intent was to round up as many of the renegade Jewish Christians as possible and bring them to Jerusalem for trial. Stephen had already been stoned for his faith, and Paul was breathing hatred against the rest in the church. But when the Lord appeared to Paul on the Damascus road, his question wasn't "why are you persecuting the Christians?" or "why are you persecuting those who believe in me?" Instead, he asked, "Saul: why are you persecuting Me?" And when Saul asked the obvious question: "Who are you, Lord," and he received the answer "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (vv. 15-16). The risen Christ so identifies with the church that to persecute *them* is to persecute *Him*.

The identification shouldn't surprise us. What does Matthew 25 report about the hungry, thirsty, the strangers, the ill-clothed, the sick and imprisoned? They are *Jesus*, and those who either minister to or ignore them are reaching out to, or rejecting, *Jesus* without knowing it.

We might think from all this that the lesson is obvious: what God showed Paul on the Damascus road wasn't about Paul, it was about Jesus.

If we think that the message is about Jesus, we'll be right enough in one respect, but I think we'll still have missed the main point of what the risen Lord had to say. Because the passage doesn't end there.

Without the least hint of hesitation, the Lord says "**But get up and stand on your feet**" (v. 16). And that brings us back to the verse we've already read twice. I'll read it again: "**I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you.**"

It may be startling to think about, but **Jesus' appearing to Paul was no more about Jesus and his own needs than it was about Paul and his.**

If it had just been about focus on Jesus, Paul was already singularly focused on him (only, negatively). The incident turned Paul's passion around from being persecuting Jesus to proclaiming him. But that's hardly a surprise. And if that had been all there was to it, Jesus wouldn't have needed to commission Paul for anything at all. But he did.

I don't know any good way to say this but straightforwardly. Although Jesus was and is Lord of all, *he didn't come to manifest that or to prove it*. He didn't need to. He came to *exercise* that Lordship *for a purpose*. The way he did that was *by laying down his life for others*. And he bluntly asserted things like "if any want to come after me, they must take up their cross and follow me." Or "as the Father has sent me, so I send you."

If you walk out of here with nothing else, I want you to walk out with this message ringing in your ears: **God isn't so concerned about making us see the light** (who, of course, is Jesus) **as about raising us up to be the light for others.** For God, making people see the light is easy; all He has to do is shine it as He did around Paul on the Damascus road. And perhaps one day he will: as Paul would later write to the Philippians, one day "every knee will bow and every tongue will

confess in heaven and on earth and under the earth that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil 2:10-11). That disclosure of Jesus’ Lordship won’t take Paul’s testimony or ours to bring it about. But neither, apparently, will it be a saving confession.

What *did* require Paul’s testimony—and what requires your testimony and mine and everyone’s who experiences the grace of the Lord—is something else. What requires our testimony is the **grand purpose of bringing people to faith and discipleship**.

Nothing is more natural to Christians than to confess Christ. But people need models. They need companions. They need the grace of God mediated to them through human vessels. When Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus road, he sent him into the city and completed the ministry to Paul *through a Christian*—Ananias.

Jesus is Lord, but he has determined to reach the world through exercising his Lordship in followers.

The Damascus road appearance wasn’t about Paul (though we can be sure that God was concerned for Paul’s salvation), and only in the ultimate content of our message was it about Jesus (though as Christians we have no other message and no one to whom we ought to call people but Jesus: as Peter told the Jewish high council, “there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” [Acts 4:12]). **In its purpose, Jesus’ appearance to Paul was about something else.**

**It was about mission to a world.** And that is third and positive point:

### **It’s About Everyone**

“It is the Father’s will that *all* come to salvation,” the Bible plainly tells us (1 Tim 2:4).

From Abraham to maybe the next-to-the-last person to be received into the kingdom before Christ’s return, **conversions are inaugurations into mission**. “In you shall the *nations* of the world be blessed,” God said to Abraham. “The Son of Man came *to seek and save the lost*,” Jesus said of himself. And Jesus elsewhere said: “If I am lifted up [meaning, crucified and resurrected], I will draw *all people* to me.” And what about *us*? Listen again to the end of the Gospel of Matthew and very nearly the end of the Gospel of John: “Go into *all the world* and make disciples of *all nations*” (Matt 28:20); “As the Father sent me, I also send you” (John 20:21).

“The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning,” wrote the theologian Emil Brunner.

When Jesus disclosed his purpose in appearing to Paul, it was a mission purpose. It was for the purpose that Paul might INVEST himself in the lives of others *everywhere* he went.

Paul was told that he would be sent to the Gentiles “to open their eyes so that *they* may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that *they* may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (v. 18).

And Paul reports: <sup>19</sup>“After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, <sup>20</sup>but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance.

Sounds like Jesus’ commission to his disciples in Acts 1:8, doesn’t it? To Jerusalem, then all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. The point is, **as Christ’s followers, we are called to start exactly where we are and reach outward. We are to INVEST our lives in others so that they, like us, may come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.** As Christians, we may never sit back and rejoice in our salvation without taking up our place in the church, the body of Christ, still reaching out to the world.

An artist was once asked to paint a picture of a dying church. It was expected that he would paint a small and humble congregation in a dilapidated building. Instead, he painted a stately edifice with a rich pulpit and magnificent windows—and near the door, an offering box, marked “Missions,” with the contribution slot blocked by cobwebs.

**God’s purpose with Paul and with us is none other than the purpose for which Jesus himself came.** The chosen instrument of God’s will is the church, and its members individually gifted and graced **to reach the world** and to promote the growth of all. **It’s about the world—everyone.**

God wants all people to be saved. He said it to Abraham. Jonah had to learn the lesson. So did Peter when he was sent to the house of Cornelius. And so do we all.

John 3:16 got it right: “God so loved **the world** that He sent His only Son.” And John 20:21 follows it: “As the Father sent me, I also send you.” Together, those scriptures tell the story of history as God intends it.

Our first and enduring call is to INVEST our lives in others in order to bring them to fullness of life in Jesus. If *the world* is reached—as God intends—it will be reached through his redeemed people INVESTING the blessings of our redemption.

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